

# Acquisition Activities in Intensive Reading

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*By Xu Zhenghua*

If we, the foreign language teachers, can provide or create a life-like situation in which our students are exposed to adequate foreign language inputs, and motivate the students to use the foreign language while teaching them the language concepts, the students will greatly improve their communicative competence. The following example will demonstrate this. Our students have learned to answer the question, "You are not a student, are you?" either by "No, I am not," or "Yes, I am." They know consciously that if they want to give a negative answer, the whole sentence should be in the negative form and vice versa. However, when they are asked such a question in their daily life, they will sometimes utter the wrong answer, saying, "Yes, I am not" or "No, I am." This example illustrates that knowing about a language is far from enough.

For years I have studied how to help our language learner become more competent. Through my teaching experience I have realized that language acquisition and language learning, the two ways of developing competence in a second language, are interrelated and mutually supplementary. Krashen (1983) says, "Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning." These words have helped me to develop four possible ways to conduct acquisition activities in classroom teaching. They are *vivid linking*, *story retelling*, *self-directed statement*, and *role-playing*.

## Vivid Linking

In my intensive reading class, I often try to put the new words and expressions from the text into real life contexts whenever possible. For example, take the phrase "be on one's knees doing something." I told my students to think of a famous Japanese TV cartoon show titled "Clever Yi Xiu." I asked them to describe how Yi Xiu mopped the floor. The students described it without difficulty. They said, "Yi Xiu is always on his knees mopping the floor." When they uttered this sentence, the picture of the cartoon vividly appeared in their minds. When I taught the students the use of the preposition "from," I told them that "from" could be followed by another prepositional phrase. Some students did not quite understand this linguistic concept. So I reminded them of an advertisement often appearing on TV. I said, "The chemist raised two fingers and looked at you...." The students continued, "from above his spectacles, saying 'two tablets.'" Some students who were wearing glasses even looked at me from above their spectacles and raised their two fingers as the chemist did in the ad. Tapping into their knowledge of another image helped them understand the difficult linguistic concept better. I said, "Suppose a little boy is very naughty, and his father wants to spank him, but the boy is under the bed. What will the father do?" The students answered in chorus, "Drag him out from under the bed." After these examples when I asked the class if anyone had any more questions, they emphatically said, "No."

From the above examples we can see that when teaching or learning a second language, the explanation of a linguistic concept is often necessary but not always sufficient. Situational language teaching, or language in real communication, helps much in learning a second language.

Another example of how real life experiences helped my students learn foreign linguistic concepts is shown when the students were studying a new lesson titled "Factory Life-A Student Experience." They were confronted with several new terms, such as "assembly line," "conveyor belt," and "mentally ill." I recommended that the students think of the well-known American comedy *The Modern Age*. I told them to think of Charlie Chaplin. In the film he is a worker with a screwdriver in his hand. The factory he works in is equipped with assembly lines and he works at a conveyor belt. After a day's boring work involving only one action, screwing, he becomes mentally ill and has to be sent to hospital. He even wants to screw the buttons on a woman's coat. My students burst into laughter. By then the new terms were not merely terms in their textbooks but associated with real images in their minds.

On many occasions I tell my students the meanings of new phrases first and then provide them with situations in which the new terms are used. For instance, with the phrase "beyond one's means," I said to them, "Suppose you find a very beautiful dress in a shop and you like it. But you cannot buy it, because...." The students responded at once, "it is beyond my means." When they learned the phrase "dirty looks," one of my students, Paul, was asked to give dirty looks to a disruptive student. With that little show the students said, "We could neither forget the phrase 'dirty looks' nor the real dirty looks from Paul. What dirty looks they were!" This is my intention: To take the language learners beyond verb forms and vocabulary lists to more lasting insights into language and language use.

## Story Retelling

Teachers as well as students are well aware that in a language learning situation, all classroom activities are contrived for language learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to plan realistic activities, or acquisition activities, that are relevant to the students' everyday life and communication needs. So in my class, besides explaining the text and doing exercises, I often provide the students with some interesting stories to read. Instead of giving all the students the same stories, I give them different ones.

After reading, the students are supposed to tell their stories to a partner in their own words or use the words they remember from their readings. In any case, they are not allowed to read the story to each other. When this is done each student is asked to retell the story heard from his or her partner to the whole class. The intent is to make the students focus on the meaning they want to get across, not focus on the linguistic forms that are being used. In telling or retelling the story, the students are allowed to use gestures and facial expressions, but not Chinese. They are informed that each pair of students will share the marks for the story's retelling. The marks are mainly based on the meaning of the story, not on the language. In this kind of activity, the students do not feel like they are just doing exercises. They are eager to tell their partner the plot of the story, so they let the language take care of itself. The principle here is, as Krashen (1983)

puts it, "Normal conversation tends to be quite rapid, and the speakers' attention is usually on what is being said, not how it is being said."

## Self-directed Statement

The self-directed statement activity places the responsibility for communication chiefly on the learners themselves. The teacher's role is to prepare proper topics. For instance, when I was teaching the text of "My Wonderful Lousy Poem," I asked the students to try to fully understand both the mother's love and the father's love as stated by the author. I allowed them 10 minutes to write out their understanding of both kinds of love according to their own experiences. In their preparation, they concentrated on collecting evidence from events that happened in their daily lives. When they reported on their individual understanding of the terms to the class, the most important thing was to get the meaning across as effectively as they could. They were not to be overly concerned with using exactly the correct words or using them accurately. Circumlocution in this activity was not only permitted, it was desirable if it aided communication. It is what they said that counted, not how they said it. Something interesting happened: When some of them were telling about their views of the love shown by their parents, they used the exact sentences and expressions from the text. When asked if they deliberately recited these sentences, they answered negatively. They said that they did not intend to copy them. These words just flowed right out of their mouths. They could not tell which sentence was the author's and which was theirs. This meant that these expressions were no longer expressions appearing just in the text, but they became part of the learners' language.

Helen Keller's *Three Days to See* triggered my students to talk about what they would most want to see if they had only three days of sight. I suggested another topic: What would you do if you had only three days to live? Everyone tried to be first. The things they would do differed from each other. In short, this kind of exercise gave them confidence in talking to someone in a foreign language and in expressing real ideas instead of quoting from the book.

With this kind of activity, students do not feel that they are merely doing exercises. Instead, they are communicating with others. Whenever I devise these kinds of exercises, I have Krashen's (1983) advice on second-language acquisition in mind: "Activities in the classroom focus at all times on topics which are interesting and relevant to the students and encourage them to express their ideas, opinions, desires, emotions and feelings."

## Role-playing

Role-play is another acquisition activity for learning a foreign language. When my students were studying the text *A Question of Exercise*, I suggested that they put on a performance about an overweight man who was trying to lose weight. The students gave an excellent performance. They not only made their conversations based on the meaning of the story but also created some interesting plots. In addition, the phrases or expressions from their text that fit their particular situation were too few, so they went beyond the text to create suitable sentences. In other words,

they were not just repeating what they learned from the text, they were actually doing creative work that required inventiveness, resourcefulness and a good bit of knowledge.

When we were working on the text of *A Sense of Direction*, I asked one of my students from Tianjin to play the role of a traffic policeman and another student from another part of China to play the role of a stranger to Tianjin. When the stranger asked the way, the policeman had to give information based on reality. If the policeman's answer was not correct, other students from Tianjin would correct him. Of course, they corrected his mistakes in information, not in language. The policeman told me that when giving directions, there was no time for him to think of the expressions in the textbook. He said, "I just thought of the way to the exact places and let the language take care of itself."

When teaching the reading *Gesture*, instead of explaining the linguistic concepts, I asked my students first to make different gestures according to the descriptions from the text and then to explain these gestures in English. After these exercises, certain expressions such as "palm downwards," "the fingers flexed," and "protrude one's lips" became the students' own language. They said, "We not only know about these phrases, we can also express ourselves by using these phrases." In doing such exercises, mistakes are unavoidable. However, I only correct the mistakes when the meaning is unclear. As all of us know, the purpose of learning a language is to communicate. And communication consists of not only passively accepting sounds, graphics and letters, but also producing what one wants to express. Role-play stimulates the learners' attempts to use the language they are learning.

## Conclusion

All foreign language teachers are well aware that there exists a gap between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Some students know much about the language they are learning and are good at syntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary. But when put on their own, they often simply cannot readily use patterns and vocabulary spontaneously and fluently in a novel situation. There is often stumbling and hesitation, sometimes long and very complete silence. During the last term's final examination, the foreign teacher said to each student as the student handed in his or her paper, "Happy Spring Festival!" A few responded in kind by saying "Thank you," or "You too." Most of the students only smiled and left the classroom without saying a word. Quite often, in spontaneous situations like this, there are no responses. It's not that the students do not know the correct response, it is that they are not confident to respond when confronted with a real-world use of the foreign language. Of course this kind of phenomenon is not confined only to speaking but also to writing, reading, and listening. So in order to improve a learner's progress in developing communicative competence, foreign language teachers should devise a variety of activities in which the students can use the foreign language as a means to communicate. My students have benefited from all the acquisition activities I devised. Although it is not easy to create adequate means to obtain real communication in language teaching, we should use the techniques we know to narrow the gap between linguistic competence and communicative competence.

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